

Rachel answered proudly; and the Squire loved to see that touch of pride.

"I wasn't mistaken in you. I sent for you, Rachel, because I had many things to say to you, and some things to give you, among them Geoffrey's letters to me from Delhi. They will be precious to you. There are some sentences in them which will comfort you all your life. He adored you, Rachel; it is not given to any woman to call forth such reverent and perfect love, nor to deserve it."

Rachel's face flushed, but her eyes shone. Her heart was hungry for such crumbs of comfort in her desolation. It was sweet to be assured, so undeniably, that she had been so much to her soldier-husband.

"But tell me about the little girl," the Squire said, presently, with a smile.

"Oh, there is nothing to tell. She is just a white-faced baby who sleeps and eats," Rachel answered. "I have called her Evelyn."

"I thank you, and pray that she may grow up like her whose name she bears. I can wish for you nor her nothing better here, Rachel. You, who remember my mother, know that."

"I thought Geoffrey would like it," Rachel answered, "especially as this is Clement Abbot. Perhaps I was a little too selfish in that."

"Not at all. He is a fine little fellow. Perhaps, who knows, some day he will be Squire of Studleigh," said the Squire, with a sigh. "My son, I fear, has a poor heritage of health from his father. I believe I was wrong to marry. There is another thing I wish to say, Rachel, concerning your boy, and you must not say a word in demur. I have bequeathed Stonecroft to him absolutely. It will remain in trust for him until he is of age. Hush, not a word. I will not listen. It was my duty, apart from my privilege. No, I will not listen! It is done, and is quite unalterable."

Rachel rose to her feet.

"Your wife, Mr. Ayre," she said, with difficulty. "She will have the right to feel aggrieved. Pardon me for saying candidly that I should prefer that she had no cause for added bitterness against me."

He gathered from her manner more than from her words that she very deeply felt what she was saying, and a look of pain came upon his face. It is no exaggeration to say that his wife's continued and studied ignoring of Geoffrey's wife was a trial to the Squire, which weakened both body and mind.

"She knows of it, Rachel. Perhaps—who knows—the hands of the children may disperse this strange and needless bitterness. I pray God it may be so, on my dying bed."

The sound of a quick, short step on the corridor fell on their ears, then the door was hastily opened, and the little heir ran in, laughing, up to his father's side, and clambered on the couch.

"Willie, this is your cousin Clement, Uncle Geoff's little boy," said the Squire, with a grave, kind smile. "Kiss him, and say you are glad to see him, and promise me that you will always love him and be kind to him."

But the heir declined to bind himself, and the two regarded each other with that unblushing and delicious candour characteristic of their years. Even at that moment the contrast between them was very marked. Although the little heir was two years older than his cousin, he was scarcely taller, and his figure was very slender; his face was too pure and delicate for health. Little Clement was a great, strong, hardy fellow, on whose sound constitution the trying climate of the East had evidently had little effect.

"Suppose you take your little cousin down to mamma, Willie," said the Squire presently, but Rachel intervened.

"If it is pride, forgive me," she said, quickly. "But it will be better, perhaps, that we should not intrude upon Lady Emily. If she has a desire to see Captain Ayre's son, Pine Edge is not very far away."

Once more a quick, impatient sigh escaped the Squire's lips.

"I regret to hear you speak thus, Rachel, and yet I cannot blame you. Promise me that you will meet my wife half-way when she seeks to be

friendly with you," he said eagerly. "Do not be too hard upon her, Rachel. You know—or perhaps you do not know—how she has been reared, hedged about from infancy by pride and exclusiveness which had no limit. Promise me that you will not bear malice for the sake of our beloved one, whom I shall see so soon."

Rachel's lips quivered.

"I promise that I will do what I can to conciliate Lady Emily, for Geoffrey's sake and for your sake, who have been so generous and brotherly in your treatment of me," she said, impulsively. "One of the first lessons I shall teach my children will be reverence for their Uncle William."

"Teach them to have a kindly memory of one who, with all his faults, tried honestly to do his duty," the Squire answered, with a faint, sad smile.

As he looked at the graceful woman in white, with all the pride softened away from her beautiful face, a sudden impulse moved him to send for his own wife, and, for the sake of the children, ask them to be friends. But he felt himself too weak to risk the scene, and Rachel, though not divining his thought, saw that his slight strength was spent, and made a movement to go.

"We have wearied you, I fear," she said quickly. "We shall go now, and come again when you are stronger."

"That will not be here. It is only a matter of hours," he said quietly. "Do not hurry away. I have not asked any questions about those awful days in India. We got all particulars from the Vanes. You know how kind they were in coming straight to relieve our anxiety."

"Yes, my father told me. There is no truer friend on earth than Lady Vane, Mr. Ayre."

"She thinks just so of you. You have made a conquest of them both. Well, what are you going to make of this little man—a soldier, eh?"

Rachel smiled.

"There was a time when I thought, with passionate satisfaction, of a day to come when Clement's sword should avenge his father's death; but that has passed. My slight sorrow has paled into nothingness beside the agonies of Cawnpore. I hope my son will grow up a good man, such a man as his Uncle William."

"Like his father, rather; he was a brave, honest soldier, who feared nothing in the world but wrong," answered the Squire. "Must you go? Will you kiss your poor uncle before you go, Clement Abbot Ayre. It is a grand-sounding name, young man; see that you make it an honoured one before you die."

The child, not understanding what was being said, kissed his uncle quickly, and pulling his mother's skirts, bade her come away. Rachel stooped down and kissed the Squire too. He held her hands a moment in his nerveless grasp, and then let her go. No other word was spoken by either.

Before she left the room she took the little heir in her arms, and he put his arms confidently about her neck, and said he loved her. There was something in that gravely-beautiful face which could win every heart but that of the Lady Emily.

As the mother and child went down the great staircase they met Lady Emily on the landing. Rachel's face flushed deep crimson, and hurriedly returning the distant inclination of the head, which was her sister-in-law's only greeting, drew down her veil, and made haste from the house.

Lady Emily went straight to her husband's room. He looked round eagerly.

"Did you come up the front stair? Did you meet poor Rachel and her boy—?"

"I did."

"Did you speak to her? Emily, you did not allow her, after what she has suffered, to pass unnoticed out of the house?"

Lady Emily never spoke, but took her own son on her knee, and began to talk fondly to him. Then the master of Studleigh turned his face to the wall, and the shadow deepened on his face. That unanswered question was the last he asked of his wife, for before sundown that day another Squire of Studleigh entered into his rest.

#### CHAPTER XIV—A SURPRISE FOR MR. GILLOT.

"Rosanna, where is Mr. Will?"

"I think, my lady, he has gone to Pine Edge; at least, I saw him cross the park just after lunch."

"Can you tell me how many times in a day Mr. Will crosses the park to Pine Edge, Rosanna?" asked Lady Emily, hotly, losing for a moment, before her servant, her habitual self-control.

"He goes every day, my lady, I know, because Phoebe, that's Mrs. Ayre's housemaid, told me," returned Rosanna, with a curious little smile, which at once recalled her mistress to a sense of her own imprudence in stooping to discuss her own son's comings and goings with a dependent.

"Well, I suppose he has a right to visit his cousins if he likes, any day, Rosanna. See that you do not gossip with the servants at Pine Edge about what concerns neither you nor them. If I hear of it again, I must dispense with your services, though you have been with me so long."

It was a sharp reproof, and quite uncalled for, seeing that Lady Emily had questioned of her own accord.

Rosanna bit her lip, and her angry colour rose. Of late the servants at Studleigh had found their imperious mistress very hard and unreasonable to deal with, and it is not too much to say that only love for the young Squire, as Will Ayre was already called, though only a boy in teens, made their service at all tolerable. Lady Emily made a stern regent. Many, many a lingering and passionate regret the people who had loved William Ayre now gave to his revered memory. It was half-past three on an April afternoon—a soft, grey afternoon, when the spring's radiant face was veiled in a tender pensiveness, more lovely, perhaps, than her gayer moods. Never had the smooth lawns and parks worn a more vivid green; never had there been a greater wealth of bud and bloom on wood and meadow. It was, indeed, a lovely spring. Lady Emily stood at the open hall door and looked out upon the beautiful prospect before her with eyes which had not much interest or pleasure in their depths. She was thinking of something else, a something which brought out all that was hardest and least winning in her face. The years had dealt very gently with Lady Emily Ayre. There was not a line on her smooth brow, nor about the proud, cold mouth; the delicate bloom had not faded, nor the keen, lovely eye lost anything of its brightness. She looked very young to have a tall son in his fifteenth year. She was still the acknowledged beauty of the county. Young *debutantes* had come and gone, but none had borne away the palm from that queenly woman. But she lacked that gracious, tender womanliness which is infinitely more priceless than beauty of form or face. All admired, many respected, but few, very few, loved the widowed lady of Studleigh Manor.

She stood in silent reverie for some time, and then, passing into the hall, rang the bell which stood on the table.

"Tell Simmons to bring the phaeton and be ready to drive me to Ayreleigh in fifteen minutes," was the order given.

Then Rosanna ran to attend on her mistress, and dressed her for the drive. She took the reins herself, and Simmons, very stolid and precise, sat with folded arms behind. The distance to Ayreleigh was four miles, which included the long approach to the Manor.

Ayreleigh was the county town, a quaint, sleepy hollow, with a wide, square market place, from which all the streets emerged. Her ladyship's cream ponies were well-known in Ayreleigh, which she often visited, with her son riding by her carriage when he was at home from Eton. The ponies clattered over the causeway that still afternoon, and seemed to awaken countless echoes through the sleepy old town. The clerks in the office of Mr. Gillot, the attorney, heard and recognized the din, and guessed that she was coming to see their governor. Of late her ladyship's visits to Mr. Gillot's office had been very frequent. He was ready himself at the door to receive her—a tall, stately-looking man, with a face of exceptional shrewdness, and a fine courtly manner, which had stood him in good stead during his professional life. But though he was so suave and smooth